

NORTH OF DOWNEAST

Originally published in *One New England Magazine*
27 September 2010

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JUST ONE OF MANY STUNNING VIEWS IN AROOSTOOK COUNTY, MAINE

Heading north on the Maine Turnpike, travelers pass Wells, York, Portland, Lewiston, Auburn and Augusta. When the toll road ends in the state capital, most believe that the vast acreage further north - collectively named Aroostook County - is a no-man's land punctuated by the lone city of Bangor.

But here in the Other Maine, the locals will tell you there's no such barren terrain or civilization of lost souls wandering amongst the mountains.

This is a land of proud Acadian heritage and rural roots spanning generations. There are no native lobsters in northern Aroostook County; there are, though, lakes filled with freshwater fish and streams that carve out the arborous landscape.

Vast swaths of pine trees create a palace for the mighty moose, the king of the

Great North Woods of Maine, the prize of skilled hunters and the bane of speeding drivers. And somewhere between the natural vistas tucked away in every corner of the landscape and the bilingual population of close-knit families, there is a land desperately holding onto an older, simpler time.

Most towns in The County, as it is referred to by southern Mainers, are built around a tall church and feature a handful of amenities ranging from small gas stations and local banks to independent grocery and convenience stores. Route 1, which ends in the town of Fort Kent, is transformed from a three lane highway into a meandering local route that cuts through the county.



ARRIVAL



EDMUNDSTON, NEW BRUNSWICK

The cuisine of the region is a mix of influences from wild game to French-Acadian to seafood from the coast. The region's most important crop, the potato, is a staple of both the local economy and regional restaurants. Food is cooked to be delicious and memorable for its dance across your taste buds; haute cuisine is a rarity this far north.

Unlike its cuisine, the people of Aroostook County may appear rather homogeneous at first glance. A handful of French family names - Pelletier, Michaud, Nadeau, Ouellette - dominate the phone books and newspaper clippings. But beneath their Acadian names and multi-generational roots in the region, these people are a rugged group whose stories, triumphs and daily turmoil show the depth of their characters and desire to attain the American dream. With one eye on the past and another trained on the future, they foster strong communities and crave the satisfaction of meticulously maintained homes.

Aroostook County could not be further from the rest of cosmopolitan New England. It is a land of pristine lakes, rugged wildlife and rolling hills. It is also a land of tension; post-9/11 fears near border crossings have instilled a sense of patriotism into the populace rivaling that of a Congressional hearing.

The political spectrum runs the gamut from far-left adventurers seeking refuge from the encroaching supercities of the south to ultra-conservative Republicans clinging fiercely to their guns and state rights.

Yet in each town, it's not uncommon to find a lone supermarket and a sense of community so tight that when a pharmacist in a nearby town breaks down deep in the Great North Woods, the doctor four towns over (whom she's never before met in her life) knows about the conundrum a mere ten minutes later. Mind you, this is largely without cell phone reception: word of mouth travels quickly here.



A BARN NESTLES IN A FIELD

This column chronicles an outsider's journey into the heart of Aroostook County and reports back on the finest secrets this veiled destination holds.

As a lifelong resident of industrial New Jersey explores the region's rich dining, deep cultural influences, fascinating history and curious personalities, come along for each and every step of the journey to unravel the county's mystery and intrigue.

Experience the thrills of exploration as caution is thrown to the wind and dig right into the forest-laden crown of the northeastern most state in the country; it is sure to be an unforgettable experience that will shed some light on many of the splendors of the Other Maine.



THE STUNNING LANDSCAPE OF AROOSTOOK COUNTY, MAINE